

Episode 79 ORIGINALITY IN THE FAMILIAR

SHOW NOTES

Voicemails for Isabelle

1. It opens with a love story that isn't romantic

The scene: We meet Jill and Isabelle as children and watch their bond develop. Most romantic comedies establish the romantic problem and introduce the potential couple quickly. The audience falls in love with their relationship first, making the eventual loss meaningful rather than merely a device for starting Jill's story.

Lesson: What if the central love story of a rom com isn't the romance?

2. It uses an unusual opening montage to build an entire relationship. We see Jill's childhood kiss, her fierce protection of Isabelle, their school-dance connection.

Lesson: A montage can do much more than compress time. It can establish character history, recurring behaviour, and emotional stakes.

3. The tragedy happens early rather than becoming a third-act twist. The tragedy is not the big surprise. The question becomes how Jill continues living afterward.

Lesson: Can a story become more emotionally interesting by revealing its biggest tragedy earlier than expected?

4. The romantic premise is built around one-sided communication. Jill leaves intensely personal messages for her dead sister, unaware that Wes has inherited the number. Here, Wes gets to know Jill while Jill doesn't even know he exists.

Lesson: The same storytelling device creates comedy, intimacy, suspense, romantic attraction, and an ethical problem.

5. The male lead arrives unusually late. Jill and Wes don't meet face-to-face until more than 45 minutes into the film. The movie asks us to invest emotionally in two people before they've had a conventional romantic interaction.

Lesson: A relationship can develop through anticipation, observation, and separate character experiences rather than constant scenes together.

6. The first kiss isn't particularly glamorous. Jill and Wes kiss during a cheesy tourist-bus experience while wearing Hawaiian shirts and bucket hats. The movie uses awkward tourist imagery and lets the characters' chemistry provide the romance.

Lesson: A scene doesn't have to look conventionally romantic to feel romantic.

7. The romantic male lead isn't allowed to be effortlessly perfect. Wes is attractive and successful, but his awkwardness, questionable decisions, and inability to confess the truth undermine his polished appearance. The audience can feel both affection and frustration toward him.

Lesson: Charming doesn't automatically mean trustworthy.

8. The thoughtful dinner increases guilt instead of simply increasing romance. Jill prepares chicken pot pie with cornbread crust after learning that Wes's late mother used to make it for him.

Lesson: The strongest romantic scenes are sometimes those where happiness and guilt happen at the same time.

9. **The anticipated sex scene becomes an interrupted confession.** Wes and Jill are becoming physically intimate, and Wes realizes he needs to tell her the truth. He tries to confess, but she has fallen asleep watching Top Chef. He puts her to bed and sleeps on the couch.

Lesson: The emotional obstacle is more important than the physical attraction.

10. **The major secret is revealed through a simple physical action.** At the wedding, Jill calls Isabelle while wearing Wes's jacket. The phone rings inside the pocket. No elaborate investigation, confession, or overheard conversation is required.

Lesson: A powerful reveal often comes from a physical action the audience immediately understands.

11. **The ending returns to the opening.** The movie ends with Jill and Wes leaving separate messages for Isabelle and sharing the sisters' beloved Robyn dance tradition. The brief appearance of Isabelle in the dance gives the audience a final visual connection with the original relationship.

Lesson: A satisfying ending can transform the emotional meaning of an opening scene rather than simply reverse the protagonist's fortunes.